[Mrs. Zimmerman]

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NAME OF INFORMANT Mrs. Zimmerman

ADDRESS New Marlborough

Old Mrs. Zimmerman is Swiss by birth, German by marriage, American by naturalization, and New Englandish by habitation. She is a nice-looking, friendly, motherly woman not much past fifty, but her health is not good and probably she will not live many more years. A result of her ill health is that she is nervous. All the same she has a way of accepting life pleasantly from day to day as people of strong peasant stock often do, taking great pleasure in fancy work, flowers, good cooking, a clean and cheerful home, the kindnesses of friends, and the love and pretliness prettiness of her little granddaughter. She is not appreciated by her children, who accept her work for them as a matter-of-fact, and who do not realize the seriousness of her health problems. They are thoughtless rather than deliberately unkind.

The mother's reaction to this treatment is an intense gratefulness to anyone else who shows the slightest interest in her or sympathy for her. She will talk a at great length about her problems, more repititiously than informatively. She is sincerely bewildered by the tightly closed doors of the neighborhood in which she finds herself in New England. There is no kinship for her with the run-down hill families, and the only others, with one or two exceptions, are summer city people who keep to themselves and do not care for visiting back and 2 forth. This attitude has not been helped by the actions of Mrs. Zimmerman's daughter and son-in-law since buying their country home. They have been rude and unkind to many of the natives, including those whose former home they bought. The few [dummer?] people who know and like the natives resent ill treatment of them and do not care to know such unmannerly folk. They know that Mrs. Zimmerman is not responsible for these actions, but still by force of association she must suffer for them too. Mrs. Zimmerman realizes all this, and her loneliness is doubled. She is so genuine, good-hearted, and wholesome that her daughter seems almost unrelated to her.

The young couple, living in Hartford, bought the old Chase farm for little more than the proverbial song. Besides an old house of great charm, the property included a smaller house where the descendants of the original farm-owners had lived, even after the first sale of the place to a New York doctor. When sold again to the Hartford people, the occupants of the smaller house, were forced out by subterfuge and bullying rather than a straightforward statement that their home was needed for Mrs. Bell's mother. Mrs. Zimmerman had made friends with the former residents of her little house and felt badly to see them treated them so. She remained friendly with them after they moved away, and often visits them.

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The Bells, and consequently Mrs. Zimmerman, have not been accepted on social terms by the community partly for these and partly for other reasons. They seem alien to its quiet spirit. They have brought horse-back riding and week-end parties to a neighborhood characterized by flower gardens and book shelves, and feel put out that the flower-lovers and book-lovers have not called on them. They cannot understand an aristocracy of intellect, nor even an aristocracy of kindliness and wholesomeness, from which springs Mrs. Zimmerman. They know only the aristocracy of business and money and property.

In her speech Mrs. Zimmerman has the usual difficulty of the European with the English “th” sounds. Sometimes she remembers to form them and sometimes she says “dat” or “dose”. She says “as” instead of the comparative “than.” Her “s” sounds are always soft, and “v” is pronounced more like “f,” while “j” is said like “y”.

Mrs. Zimmerman had brought her blonde, curly-topped little grand-daughter to play with our four-year-old, and while the children were playing together on the floor we offered our guest a cup of tea and a cookie.

“These cookies were made with bacon grease instead of butter for shortening - can you taste it?” I asked her.

“Not so much. I use bacon grease in my cookies too, But we don't have much bacon and I use most of the grease in soap.”

“Soap? Do you make your own soap?” I asked, incredulous, in this day of manufactured soaps. “Why, I never knew anyone before who could make soap. How do you make it?”

“Well, first uf all you need a stone crock, and you put a can of lye in that with a quart of cold water. You haf to do that the night before, and let it stand - so. Then you take four pounds of grease - it don't matter what kind, but it should be strained so it is clear, and heat it so it is just melted and lukewarm, not hot. Pour it in the crock with the lye and water, den stir it good for about five minutes. Den let it get hard, and you can cut it in cakes. I haf enough soap made right now to last a year maybe. Ach? It is easy - you should make it too.”

But I always heard that home-made soap was hard on your hands,” I said. At this Mrs. Zimmerman spread out hers eloquently.

“Look at mine!” she demanded. It don' hurt mine none. I always used it, since I wass ust a little girl in Switzerland. My mother made 2 all uf her soap that way. Many times haf I been glad to make my own soap, when I hadn't much money. Den I could use what money I had for food. In Germany during the war - ”

“Oh - weren't you born in Switzerland?” I interrupted.

“Yes, I wass. On a little farm - oh, a very nice little farm! We had plenty cows, and we made lots of cheeses and butter. Everybody worked, - the children did all the chores. Sometimes we went to school - not very much, dough, but I can read and write. I haf learned many tings since I grew up. On Sundays we did no work at all besides what we had to, and den we wore our best dresses and went happy to church. They were such pretty dresses! I yust wish I had one to save for the baby. An' would you believe it - dey

are in style now! - dose striped country skirts and aprons. I wass a pretty girl, people said - like my daughter iss now - and I had a lot of beaux!”

She laughed shyly at her own story, and her fine eyes shone, remembering long-ago sunny Sundays. I could well believe that she had been a very attractive girl - prettier, I felt sure, than her Americanized daughter.

“Den, I met Hans and we right away got married,” she went on. “And I had six children. One, the oldest boy, is still in Switzerland, and I haven't seen him since we left. He hass now a little boy ten years old. My, wouldn't I like to see him, dough! Then I lost two babies. It was a hard thing to have babies den, and lots of times they died, or the 3 women died because dey weren't taken good care of. I never once had a doctor when my babies came - yust midwives, an' sometimes dey were yust dirty an' ignorant women. My babies were all big too - not like dese little seven-pound ones that the girls have now. Eight, nine, ten pounds mine all were! I guess - “she hesitated, then went on bravely - “I guess maybe it wassn't so good for me, dough. I went to the doctor yesterday. He said I haf’ some trouble left from one of dose times, an' if I don't haf an operation it will be bad. Well, I've lived long enough anyway. My children don't need me any more.”

“But wouldn't you like to see this baby grow up?” I asked, indicating the child on the floor.

“My, yes! but she too can get along without me. Mine got along without their grandmothers. Hans’ mother was never friendly with me, and my mother died. We left Switzerland to work a big farm in Germany before the war came. I worked as hard as Hans. Yes, I did. I milked eleven cows twice a day, and I worked out in the fields, yust like a man. I used to bring my little girl in a carriage and leave her in it under a tree at the edge of the field while I worked. Den I had to cook and keep house besides. That wassn't eassy either. We had only one room in our cottage. It had a thatched roof and dirt floor and white-washed plaster walls. We all slept and ate and lived in that one room! I had to carry water to cook with an drink, and do my washing in a river that ran near us. Our house

wass much poorer than even the houses that people on relief 4 haf here, but we were always wery, wery clean. And we had money enough too. That was yust the way farmers lived. We got pretty good wages, and saved our money. We had bank accounts and five thousand dollars insurance on every one of the children. But den, the war came, and our money that we worked so hard for, wass soon not worth hardly anyting. So we went back to Switzerland."

"But how did you happen to come here?" I enquired.

"Hans had a brother that went to Ohio' that's why. He said we should come. And the Swiss government was paying fares for people who wanted to go to America. Dey wanted to get rid of us," she laughed. "But we had to sign papers that said we would not come back. So we went to Ohio." Mrs. Zimmerman smiled. Her face shone. I could see that Ohio, not Switzerland, was truly her home-place.

"Ach, I love Ohio! The people, they are so friendly! There wassn't a day I didn't go to Doctor Hoffmeyer's. I would go in, and if dey were haffing supper I would get a plate and sit down right with them. If I didn't go over same days Mrs. Hoffmeyer would send the children to see if I wass sick. And all the neighbors were like that. So good! They had a party for me when I moved away, and all of dem gave me presents. There are no neighbors like dat here. I get so lonesome dat I tink effery day I will go back to Ohio."

Mrs. Zimmerman speaks of Ohio as if it were a village instead of a state. To her Ohio means a small community bounded on all sides by kindliness. She resumed after a short pause.

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"Here I don't know hardly anybody but you and Mrs. Cruickshank, and my daughter doesn't want me to go there - or come here, either. She doesn't like it because the people in the big houses haven't come to see her, but I tell her she and James had no right to treat the Cruickshanks like they did, and the people around here don't like it. I yust

don't know why they did it. And I don't care if they like it or not - I am going to see Mrs. Cruickshank. She is so nice! I like her. And you too you have been better to me since I have been here as Mary has been herself. She iss so young! Maybe when she iss older she will be better - but den I will be gone! Maybe it iss my own fault, dough - maybe I spoiled her - my only girl, and the baby. But before she got married she was always good to me - cooking and cleaning the house while I worked out."

"What sort of work did you do?" I asked her.

"Well, after we wass in Ohio awhile, Hans he got sick and couldn't work. So I did housework and washing until the children were through school. Then my son got a job in Hartford, and when Mary came to see him she met James, and married him. Then Eric, my son as is still at home, he wanted to come and work in Hartford too. So when Mary and James bought this place up here in the country, they wanted Eric and me to live here. But oh dear, I am so lonesome with no neighbors and no car. I had a car all the time, always, till I came here. Now Eric needs it to go to work. And it iss so far to walk to anywhere. I wish the Cruickshanks 6 could haf stayed in their house! I would haf stayed in Ohio if I knew how lonely it would be! But I am getting too old now to work so hard and make my own living."

Mrs. Zimmerman was on the verge of tears after these assertions, and for some time neither of us said anything. Finally, however, she shrugged her shoulders and smiled.

Look - don't you think this will be pretty?" she said as she spread on her lap the crochet work she was doing. "It is going to be a tablecloth for Mary. She asked me to make it for her. But I can't do it very fast because the thread is so expensive, and I don't have much money to spend. I made Mary some riding breeches last week, and I made a good heavy quilt out of woolen squares - tailor's samples they were, Ach! I keep busy all the time - cooking, cleaning, sewing - and cleaning the big house too. Mary hasn't any help but that nurse-maid, an' she won't even wash the dishes - yust think of that!"

We watched the children building a house of blocks and smiled at their delighted shrieks when it tumbled down.

“Janey luffs to come here and play with Peter. She talks all the time about going to Peter's house. She iss too small to know if people haf a grand big house or not.”

There is a growing plant upon the window sill, and our guest notices it.

“You haf a new plant? I haf one like dat too - only mine is much bigger - I've had it so long. It hass grown out of many pots. I 7 brought all my plants with me from Ohio in the car. I couldn't bring many things, but I brought my plants. I luf to haf things growing around me. More than Americans do, I guess. In Europe where I lived the farmers tended their land carefully, but here it seems everybody yust tries to see what they can get out of the land. Almost nothing is put back in, and much is wasted. Nothing effer wass wasted on our farm in Europe! You should see the way people pick up sticks and twigs and dried grass to burn! When I came here I could not understand how the folk could be so extravagant, burning so much wood! It wass the same way in the fields. After the harvest came folk to look for effery small potato or grain of wheat left behind.

“Effery bit of manure wass precious in Germany. We saved it carefully, to spread on the fields. And nobody had garbage to yust throw away. Effery thing wass used for something. Neffer a crust of bread or a cup of sour milk was thrown away. There wass some stuff for the pigs, and what they would not eat was put in a compost heap.

“Lots of women there put food in their soup that Americans - even poor Americans - throw away. Our soup kettle was always on the stove, and we put in it bones, and bits of vegetable or cereal, and boiled it all together and then strained it. Then we put in some rice or barley and cooked that. It makes fine, hearty soup, a whole meal with bread and cheese.”

“Aren't you rather shocked, then, by the shiftlessness of same of our neighbors?” I asked.

“Yes, I am! And I think the farmers around here would be better off if dey were more careful of their land and their wood and beasts and all - and if their wives made soap and clothes and rag rugs for their houses, instead of buying so much.”

“Some of them are still thrifty, and do these things,” I told her.

“But in Europe country people still do the things that their ancestors did, in the same way, for hundreds of years back. And it seems very nice that they do.”

“Do you ever wish to be back there again?” Mrs. Zimmerman hunched up her shoulders and slowly smiled in a characteristic way, then answered me.

“Ach, no. I like the comforts we haf here. And they are sure to haf war there soon again. That Hitler hass got the Germans crazy. No, I am lonesome an' sick an' old, but I guess I rather die here in my bed as to be hit by a bomb in Europe.”

“And you are alone at night too, aren't you? Are you very afraid to stay alone?”

“No - why should I be afraid? I got a gun under my pillow! Dat fellow Gil Carter came around drunk las’ Saturday night about two o'clock in the morning, hollering an' singing an' making a big fuss.

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Mary an' James were in the big house, an' James came out with a shotgun an' told Gil to go along home or he would shoot him. Gil was scared, I guess, but he didn't want James to know it. I had opened my window and I heard the drunk one holler, ‘You can't shoot me, mister! People around here don't do things like that!’ Then he went away. I hope he don't come back again.”

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Mrs. Zimmerman folded up her crochet and put it into a bag. “Come Janey, it iss time to go home,” she said, and started to put on the child's coat and bonnet, encountering considerable resistance as her victim would much rather have continued playing.

“They are going back to Hartford tonight, and I shall be lonely again. Soon you will come up if you can? Please, I would luff to see you. An' I will give you some butterscotch pie an' coffee!”

So the old lady and the little girl started for home, the grandmother with the folkways of middle Europe bred into her bones, and the tiny girl so close to her in blood, but so distant in the way of life she is destined to follow.

[Mrs. Zimmerman] http://www.loc.gov/resource/wpalh1.15050713